



If It Helps Yours Beat, I'll Take My Heart Clean Apart **by everybreatheverymove**

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Summary: For her eighteenth birthday, El has decided that she wants to get her '011' tattoo covered up, but she can't seem to settle on a new design. The party's ideas suck for the most part, but when Mike nervously suggests she get the word 'promise' written over the ink, El can't help but find it a perfect fit. Only thing is, she wants him to do it, too. "You have to do it, too, Mike."

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"Mike!"

Mike blinks, taking more than a second to snap back to reality. He licks his lips, knitting both brows in confusion, "Huh?"

"Were you listening?" The right corner of her lip quirks up, almost as though she wants to smile. Pushing a strand of hair behind her ear, El curls her legs up beneath her on the sofa, hands resting in her lap as she waits for her boyfriend's delayed reply.

It's not like he was intentionally ignoring her or anything. (Truthfully, he isn't even sure he ever could.)

He just kind of got lost in thought, too busy thinking about that one essay he still hadn't finished, that one science project he'd left Dustin in charge of.

"Sorry, sorry." His left hand finds her knee, for just a moment, and his thumb traces a smooth circle on her inner thigh before he withdraws his touch. "What were you saying?"

He smiles, because she's patient and she's always seemed to understand, without question, that the gears of his brain never stop turning.

"It's fine," El says, wrapping her fingers around his thin wrist, replacing his hand on her knee. (Because he's warm and she, despite his protests whenever Hopper's around, likes it when he's close.) The girl dances her fingertips along the back of his hand, pushing against his knuckles, jabbing, "I want a tattoo."

"What?" It comes out as more of a squeak than Mike intended it to, but he's stunned to stay the least. Yeah, sure, she's seventeen. And, okay, she's a total badass. And, oh, right, she's already kind of inked up. "Do you mean like a... butterfly or something?"

Because he knows girls at school have done that, has heard chatter in detention about how they sometimes skip class and have their older

sisters take them down to the parlor. Apparently, butterflies and small birds and, like, stars or something were the hottest things for teenage girls to get.

And he knows Max has a simple, nothing-special 'C' on her lower back because after getting it done, she wouldn't shut up about it, or stop showing everyone because she was so freaking proud to have something that would always remind her of California. Maybe that's where El got the idea from.

He's frowning (he's sure of it), and El giggles, strangely, "I don't know what." She starts, and her eyes fall from his face down to her own arm, "I just... I don't want this one anymore."

Mike's eyes widen, and he understands then, following her shifted gaze. "Oh." He nods, twice, and then rolls up the sleeve of her sweater without her having to ask, and his expression mirrors her own. Soft frowns, biting at chapped rosy lower lips.

He never really pays much attention to her tattoo, sometimes forgets it's there in the first place.

Occasionally, he'll reach for her and his eyes will just be drawn to that spot on her forearm - like he chose to forget it was there but his subconscious knew better. Or, every so often, he'll kiss her and touch her, and when her arms have been wrapped around his neck for too long, when they weaken and he lays her down, he'll kiss her skin, all skin and scars and marks.

"I get it." He tries a smile, but he figures that it mustn't look sincere enough because El cups his cheek in one hand and forces him to look at her. And all she has to do is look before he becomes putty. "Okay."

"I'm still-"

She doesn't go by Jane to anyone other than teachers or parents or strangers. She doesn't go by Eleven to anyone other than Hopper when he's mad (which never lasts long), or Joyce when she's explaining something important (but then she mostly just calls her 'sweetie' anyway).

El is her name, to everyone who knows her, knows the story behind the name. El is her name, because once upon a time there was a twelve year-old boy who called her that and it just fit. It stuck.

"I know." Mike reassures her, knows that she understands his struggle. "I've just kind of gotten used to it, I guess." There's a grin on his face, and the words are only half a lie. Because while he forgets it's there, he's also known it was there since that first night, the first time they met.

He's known she was marked, labelled by people, since that fateful day some five years ago. They were in this very basement, only younger and smaller and purer. She hadn't let him touch it, her, then.

"So you want to cover it?" He asks, and she nods, contemplative. "Maybe Max can go with you, to help you figure out what you want."

It's a suggestion she seems to at least consider, but then her head shakes with a blush, and brown curls untuck, and Mike smiles.

"I wanted to tell you first." She informs him, pulls her sleeve back down, "I want you to take me to get it done."

He has half a mind to tell her that Max is probably better suited for this kind of thing. But she came to him, and she wants his help in this endeavour, and he's never been one to willingly let her down.

"Okay, well," he runs a hand through tangled hair, all black and knotted and unkept, "if you don't know what you want yet then maybe we can ask Will to draw something. I mean, if you want him to. You probably don't want, like, a cartoon character on your arm or whatever, but he could totally-"

"Mike," El cuts him off, plastering her hand over his mouth, her brown eyes wide and happy, "Shut up." Her nose crinkles, "It's not my birthday yet anyway. We have time."

"You want it for your birthday?" He asks, when she's removed her hand from his mouth, "That makes sense, I mean Hopper would go crazy if you did it before then anyway. Shit," he pauses for a second, eyes wide as he stares at her, "have you told him yet?"

The girl shrugs, turning around on the sofa so her back is pushed up against the cushions, "He'll be fine. If he knows it makes me happy then he'll be happy, too."

She sounds sure of herself, but Mike makes a note to find time to talk to the Chief. There's still another two weeks before her birthday, after all.

"All right." He settles back then, long legs outstretched beneath the cluttered coffee table. It's full of forgotten textbooks and VHS tapes. His hand finds her on the seat, threading their fingers together as he draws her closer.

El presses her face against his upper arm, breath warm on his arm where the sleeves of his hoodie are rolled-up to his elbows.

"Maybe I'll get an Eggo instead of a butterfly."

He smiles, look down at her in awe. "You wanna have a waffle on your body? Permanently?" Part of him believes she's capable.

She laughs (quietly, as though she's trying to stifle it), and he knows she's teasing then, "I'd never go hungry."

"Yeah?" He snorts, "You're gonna eat your arm when you get hungry?"

"No. I'll just lick it."

"Of course." He says, tilts his head to one side so her face pushes against the side of his neck. "Can I lick it, too?"

El doesn't reply, only elbows him in the ribs with a slight 'tut'.

"But what if I'm starving? Are you gonna let me die of starvation?"

"Shut up."

"You could always try a flower," Will suggests, and the finely sharpened pencil in his hand is already tapping against the greasy table. "Like a rose or a sunflower? I think roses are girly enough."

"No sunflowers." El says, and it's clear that her mind won't be changed from the look in her eyes. She breathes heavily, raises her shoulders up and down in a slow shrug, "Maybe a rose."

"Yeah." The smaller boy nods with a gentlest of smiles, and then he's shuffling along the seat in the booth, inviting her in beside him.

She's barely sat down before the door to the diner is swinging open, Dustin and his curls breezing through, letting the chilly November air into the restaurant. It's only morning.

"Okay. Okay!" He rubs his hands together, brushes them down his legs like the friction is going to warm them up. "Whoever suggested we meet before nine o'clock in the morning on a Sunday is a dead man."

El smiles, and Will holds up his free hand defensively.

Dustin points a finger at Mike but keeps his eyes on El, "Your boyfriend's a dead man, Hop."

"Not before I get my tattoo."

Mike pulls a face, folding his arms over his chest as he glances across the table at the brunette, "Thanks for the backup."

"Woah, hold on. You're getting another tattoo?" Dustin asks, flinging his hat off and sliding into the booth beside El, forcing her into Will's side. The younger teen whines, pulling his sketchbook closer to his chest.

El nods once, gesturing down to the drawings Will is busy with. "We're trying to figure out what I should get."

"Well, it's gonna be your second one, so you've gotta make it even more badass than the first."

"It's not really a new one. She just wants to cover up her old one." Mike throws in, watching as Dustin registers the new information.

The curly-haired boy understands then, even more so when El's face lets him know that she considers her current tattoo to be everything

but 'badass'.

"Why don't you just add numbers to it?"

Mike scoffs, "What?"

"That'd really throw people off your scent. Nobody would ever think you were a science experiment; they'd just be like 'Hey, why does this chick have a random sequence of numbers all up her arm?', you know?" He grins, "That'd be kinda cool."

"Yeah. Cool." El repeats, and it's clear that she finds the idea anything but cool.

Mike chuckles, leaning back in the booth and letting his eyes fall down to Will's drawing. "What's that?"

"Oh," he begins, turning the pad around so Mike can get a closer look, "I made an 'h' out of the ones. If you do it," he twists his right arm so his fist whacks Mike straight in the chest, "so others can read it then maybe you can get 'Hop'."

"Maybe."

That seems to be her response to almost any suggestion lately.

"Why don't you just get a sleeve?" Max walks over to the table then, carrying a tray full of milkshakes and pancakes, Lucas hot on her heels with his own tray and a coffee pot in hand.

The perks of having a weekend job in a recently reopened diner that nobody wants to eat in because, you know, the previous owner kind of died there – free food when his boss isn't around.

"A sleeve?" The brunette voices, reaching across the table for an empty mug. She watches as Lucas pours her a fresh cup of coffee, thanks him, all the while listening to Max.

"It's like, your whole arm." The redhead runs a hand over her opposite forearm, wraps it around, "Just get it colored in or something."

"Wouldn't that be ugly?"

"She's not getting a sleeve, Max, Jesus!" Dustin exclaims so Mike doesn't have to. "Her punk phase didn't even last that long."

"Whatever, Dustbin." She rolls her eyes, sticks her tongue out when he whines at the nickname. "Just because you're too much of a pussy to get some ink."

"I'm not a pussy."

"Uh, yeah. You all are." She accuses, eyeing the boys, "El and I are the only ones here ballsy enough to do it."

"Hey! I'd do it, I just have to wait until I move out of town or my dad'll take the car back." Lucas adds. "And if he takes the car back then you losers – not you Wheels - won't have anyone to drive you anywhere."

"I'll just start skating again, Stalker." His girlfriend tells him, matter-of-factly. "Or we can just ask Steve."

Dustin clasps his hands together, pulls on the strings of his hoodie, "Steve has better stuff to do than take you to the mall, Maxine."

The girl pulls a face, as though she's offended at the very thought of stepping foot in the mall. "You just don't want me to stealing your sugar daddy." She jests, and Mike makes an audible groan.

"Guys!" They all turn to look at him then, all curious and wide-eyed. "Can we get back to finding El an appropriate coverup?"

"Right."

"Whatever." Max pushes at the tall boy's shoulder, forcing him to move further into the booth. It's a tight squeeze for sure now. When Lucas pulls up a stool and sits at the other side of the table (because is not squashing in there), she lifts her legs up into his lap, crossing her sneakers over his knees. "You got any ideas then, Wheeler? Or are you just gonna shit all over ours?"

Before he can answer, El pipes up, reaching over to steal the syrupy

pancake hanging from Max's fork, "Mike thinks I should get an Eggo." She tells the group, lying through her teeth.

She smiles over at the boy; defenseless, cheeks flushing when the rest of the party join in.

"Really, Wheeler?" The other girl laughs, poking his shoulder with her fork until he kicks her in the back of the leg beneath the table. "Ow! Asshole."

Mike clears his throat, "I never said that." He clarifies, shooting half-hearted daggers over at his girlfriend, who's clearly enjoying herself. "I just said-"

"That if I had an Eggo, he could lick it if he got hungry."

"El!"

"What?!" Dustin cackles, and Mike can hear Will give the lightest chuckle from beside him.

"Oh, my god."

El giggles, and Mike's head falls to his hands, elbows slipping from the table.

His groan (and subsequent blush) only intensifies when Lucas smacks his shoulder amicably. "That's the kinkiest shit I've ever heard, man."

"Shut the fuck up." He mumbles, lifting his gaze to point a finger at El, unable to hide the smallest smile that's starting to form on his lips, "You!"

She shrugs, offers him the rest of the pancake she holds between two fingers in apology, swaying it around in front of his face. He opens his mouth, waits for her to drop it in before snatching her hand and tickling up her wrist.

Dustin makes a gagging noise, shaking his head as he watches the pair, "Son of a bitch. You guys are sick."

Mike smirks, corners of his mouth curling up as he loudly chews the

piece of food, "What was that?"

"El, maybe you should get Mike's face tattooed on your ass instead," Max quips, "That way he wouldn't have to keep kissing it."

The girl just looks confused by that, "I don't-"

"Nothing."

"And you're coming to me with this why?" Hopper sounds tired, like he's either annoyed by Mike's presence or he's just bored in general.

"Well, she," he pauses, a slight frown to his face like he's not sure of himself, "I mean, she said you'd be okay with it, but I wanted to check if you were because she wants me to take her, and if I take her to get it done, and you're, like, not happy, then I'm the one being blamed and-"

The older man mutters something under his breath before he interrupts, "Jesus, kid, anyone ever tell you to shut up?"

"Yeah, you." Mike retorts, fast, and Hopper's actually kind of proud of him. (For talking back. And other stuff. He won't ever tell him this, though.)

Jim Hopper grins, and he picks up a bright green apple Flo dropped on his desk earlier, "And yet you keep talking." He eyes the fruit, then eyes his daughter's boyfriend carefully. Mike Wheeler, all striped tops and muddy sneakers and messy hair. Mike Wheeler, apple of his daughter's eye.

Damn it.

"All due respect, Chief, we both know she's gonna get it done either way. So if I don't take her, she'll probably talk Nancy into it. And Nancy totally would. Or Max. Hell, Dustin might even-"

"Yeah, yeah," Hopper cuts him off short, holding a hand up to stop the boy from rambling, "I know. She's headstrong." He nods, mostly to himself, but Mike feels the strange urge to copy.

He stands from his desk then, gaze never lifting from the apple in his hand. He turns it over in his palm, spends so many seconds not replying that Mike starts to grow uncomfortable.

It's not that they don't get along, because they do; about as well as any local police chief and the boy dating his telekinetic adopted daughter probably ever could (not to mention the added factor of, you know, all that other dangerous crap.)

Hopper kind of likes the boy, but he still calls him 'that Wheeler kid' whenever Mike's not actually around, and he still feels the need to stare him down and give him that look whenever he catches the two teens alone. He likes to act like they (mostly the Wheeler kid) aren't on the precipice of young adulthood. But-

"She know what she wants?"

The man is looking at him now, and Mike falters. "I, uh... no." He moves in his seat, "no, sir. She just said she wanted to do it on her birthday." He pauses, face flushing some kind of rose color that almost makes Hopper want to point and laugh, "Not do it. Not that. Not do it, like, you know- we don't, uh-"

"Hey!"

His hand is up again, and Mike can honestly say that he would rather die than have that conversation.

It's not like it'd matter much anyway seen as they've already kind of-"Kid!"

"Yeah?" Mike perks up, fingers curling around the arms of the chair (so tightly) when he rises to stand, face to face with the man whose validation matters more than anyone else's to the boy. (He'll probably still be a nervous wreck when he's forty years old and the Chief calls him 'kid'.)

His own dad's kind of a deadbeat, only around to provide for his family and keep a roof over their heads. He's never exactly been someone Mike could look up to, but the Chief... Hopper gets it – and while he'll never openly admit it, he's always been kind of glad that

there were actual grown adults involved in all of this shit.

"Look, I'm not thrilled at the idea of her... drawing on her body like that. But she's growing up, she can do whatever she wants." He points a finger, corrects himself because he knows it'll make Mike fluster just a touch more, "Within reason."

"Right." Of course. "Obviously, yeah."

"You take her, but you don't take any of your little buddies along for a joy-ride. Alright? I don't need any more parents breathing down my neck."

He's tempted to bring up last week's incident.

Max, outspoken rascal that she was, was supposed to be grounded for the weekend, but somehow she'd managed to talk her parents into letting her stay over at El's on Saturday night. Only El is his kind-of-daughter, and when the redhead's mom had called to speak to her own child, Hopper hadn't exactly been prepared for the shitstorm that would ensue.

El had told him that she was spending the night at Mike's (and he'd only let her because Nancy had promised to be there, too), and she hadn't exactly warned her sorta-dad of any other plans with her girl friend or asked him to cover (not that he would anyway, obviously).

So, Max's mom called him, and he called Joyce, who called Mike's mom, and she called the Sinclairs, and Lucas' mom informed her that the party (as the kids so affectionally – or irritatingly referred to themselves) were spending the night at Dustin's.

Only Dustin's mom had absolutely no knowledge of any such thing, given she was home alone save for her cat and an unopened bottle of wine. (Hopper still has nightmares of her shrieking 'Dusty!' down the wire.)

He'd took it upon himself to pick Nancy up from the Wheelers' (despite Karen's protests that the girl was only visiting and therefore didn't need to involve herself in her little brother's business. But Hopper knew better.) Though it'd turned out that the girl – well,

woman now, more like – had been lied to as well, told the group were hanging at Lucas'.

She'd rolled up the sleeves of her jacket, turned down the radio volume as they approached the dirt-track leading up to the quarry, flung the passenger side door open so hard Hopper was half-convinced she'd break the latch.

"I'm gonna kill him." Nancy had said, barely breaking a sweat as she took off down the path, not waiting for the officer to follow.

It's not like they'd been up to no good - far from it, really. It's just... Hopper likes to know where Eleven is at all times (well, most times, given he promised her space and all), and he's sure the other kids' parents feel the same for the most part.

"What the hell, Mike!" It's not a question, and Nancy has her brother by the arm before anybody can stop her. She punches his arm (not hard), but lets go when El grabs his other hand.

"Hey... Chief."

"Shit." The redhead behind them has the decency to look guilty, at least, and the grown man wants to smirk but he contents himself with a simple shake of the head, "Did my mom call you?"

"Yeah." He nods, and he'd sounded grumpier than he meant to, "Turns out you were supposed to be having a sleepover but my kid forgot to mention it at breakfast this morning." He'll tell El off later.

"What are you even doing out here?" Nancy's arms are crossed over her chest, and she's taken a few steps away from the group now.

"Will needed to tell us something." Mike shrugs, but his short answer does nothing to calm his sister's mood.

Will steps forward though, "I just-"

El cuts him off, placing a hand on his elbow, "You don't have to tell him, it's none of his business."

Turns out the youngest Byers kid had some pretty personal stuff to

share with his friends, and it wasn't a conversation that could've taken place in someone's basement, so...

Hopper had let them off with a warning, come up with a bullshit excuse for Max's mom that bought her some time. It's not that he doesn't like the kids, he just-

"Chief?"

Mike's still in front of him, one hand gripping the strap of his backpack flung over his shoulder. He's damn near as tall as him now, that little shit.

"You get the thing, and you come straight home. Got it? No drinking. No smoking."

He likes teasing the kids sometimes.

The boy's eyebrows raise and lower, and there's a small smile on his face. "Okay."

"And try not to let her get anything bigger than this, okay." Hopper holds up the fruit as though Mike has no idea how big an apple is, and he gives him a pointed look, "Within reason."

"Within reason. Copy that."

Hopper rolls his eyes at that, waving a hand in the younger man's face. "Yeah." He sighs (for effect), says, "Now get outta my office. I've got work to do."

Mike snorts, and Hopper's tempted to throttle him.

Sure.

"You asked him?"

The boy nods, fingers digging in his back pocket for the crumpled up piece of paper. He accidentally catches the horn with his elbows when he leans forward to angle himself, and El grabs his shoulders to steady him.

Luckily, the noise doesn't startle anyone because they're in his car in the middle of the night, outside the diner where the last customers are clearing out. (Lucas is on shift again so they can eat after-hours).

"Mike?" She's all button-nose and soft fringe, and he glances up at her with a sheepish smile, pulling his hand from his pocket. He wags the paper around proudly before opening it up, unfolding it in-between them.

El shuts the car off so he doesn't have to, doesn't make another loud blare ring out, and she scrunches her nose to stop the light blood that threatens to spill. "What did Hopper say?"

"He's cool with it." He says, and he leans closer to her, holding the now-crinkled piece of paper up against the dashboard. "I think he just wants you to be happy."

"I told you." She points out, and then she's undoing her seatbelt and spinning around in her seat so she can face him properly, tucking her skirt between her legs as they fold. "Did Will draw those?"

Mike blinks, snuffles because he's kind of cold. (She turns the heating on then, without even telling him). "Yeah. He dropped them off earlier, said you asked for some more ideas."

Her birthday's tomorrow, and she still hasn't made her mind up.

Colored waffles, a war victim identification number, and flocks of birds hadn't appealed to her, it seems.

So, Will had dropped by Mike's house after school and slid him a torn-out sheet of his drawing pad.

He'd sketched butterflies on one side, all different sizes and patterns and colors (a palette of pinks and reds, mostly). The other side was a bunch of random stuff, like the odd flower or a rainbow. He'd done each design over a drawing of her forearm, and he'd incorporated the '011' into every one so she could get a clearer idea of what the end result might look like.

"That one's nice."

El taps her finger against a pink swan, chewing at her bottom lip.

"Mike?"

He makes a little noise to let her know he's listening, but his eyes are scanning the sheet of paper over and over again.

She frowns with the smallest of smiles, admiring how he's always so deep in thought but wanting his attention. She pokes his cheek, right in the dimple, to get him to focus on her. He pretends to swat her hand away with a huff, but El only giggles and holds onto his hand.

"What if I change my mind?"

"Well, you've... You've kind of gotta make your mind up first before you can change it." The boy tells her, face the picture of confusion.

El just rolls her eyes, pretends she doesn't love the pastel tint his cheeks radiate in the darkness. He isn't so pale at night. But she's still naturally tanned, and her skin has this soft amber glow when it's past midnight.

"I mean, what if I pick something and then I... regret it?" Her brows knit, but the gentle smile doesn't lift from her lips. They're just pink and plump and freshly puckered. She bites the inside of her cheek, watches as his brown eyes widen and he understands.

"Oh. Oh," Mike stammers, and she's never seen him look so attentive, "well, you could always just get it crossed out."

"Like a line?" She traces a finger down her forearm, over the numbers that mark her skin. "That would be... boring."

"Yeah, you know, or maybe get something written over it. You..." He clears his throat with a shake of his head, "Never mind. It's stupid."

El just grabs his hand, noticing when his fingers start twitching, and she pulls them to her lap. "Mike."

"It's just... I mean, it's really stupid but you could always-" He sighs, a heavy breath she isn't sure he needs to take, "I was thinking, maybe, you could get a, uh-"

She's used to him fumbling over his words when he's nervous, but she's growing impatient and doesn't understand what he has to be nervous about right now, "What?" El pulls a face, tightens her grip on his fist.

It seems to actually settle him, because Mike licks his lips and look up at her with long eyelashes, all sleepy and anxious, "How about 'promise'? You know, like... the word?"

"Promise?"

"Yeah." He confirms, and then he pulls his hand from her own, runs a finger from just below her elbow down to her wrist, smoothing over the '011', "Promise."

She can see it, see the way the 'o' would disguise the '0', see how the '11' could fit into an 'm'. She can see it, and she can feel it when he writes the word down her arm with his index finger, lukewarm skin dancing along her softness.

His brows raise as his touch falls, and then he's looking at her all puppy-dog-eyed and expectant, like he's waiting for her reaction.

"I like it."

"Yeah?" He doesn't want to sound hopeful, but- "It's okay if you don't. I totally get it if you don't want-"

El nods, and then her lips part with an amused grin. He just talks so much, and doubts himself so much, and she loves (him for) it.

"Friends don't lie, Mike."

"Yeah, but we're not just friends." He points out, and then he smirks, and El wants to groan at his smugness. Gosh, he's so-

"So, technically, you could lie. There's a loophole right there." He's joking now; she's sure of it.

The brunette retrieves the piece of paper from the dashboard and folds it up neatly before storing it inside the glovebox. "Mouthbreather." She mumbles, keeps her lips drawn tight.

"Hey!" He pokes her shoulder this time (twice), and waits for her to face him again before continuing, "That's just rude."

El raises a brow, mocking, "Is it?" She puffs out her lips, "Whatever."

"El."

"Michael."

"Were you serious?" He's back to doubting himself, she notes. "About the-"

"Yep."

"Do you promise?"

"Yes. I promise."

"Okay." He nods, and he winks at her despite her very blatant eye-roll, "Cool."

"You have to do it, too, though."

Wait.

"What?!"

"You have to do it, too, Mike."

"Since when?"

"Since 'promise' is our thing, and it was your idea." El tells him, and she pulls one leg beneath her, chin resting on her knee, "You have to promise."

His mom is gonna fucking kill him.

"I won't be mad if you don't."

He believes her, but he's also not a big fan of letting her down. Besides, it could be kind of cool. To have something that's theirs, that only they share. And it would sure as shit shut Max up about the guys being pussies.

(Most of all, he kind of likes the idea of having a piece of her with him at all times. And vice versa.)

"Okay."

The girl's smile broadens then, and she leans over to plant the briefest of kisses on his lips, "Bitchin'."

He cups her face, rests his forehead against her adoringly, "Yeah. Sure."

"Can we go eat now?"

The pain passes sooner than he expects it to.

When it's been an hour and his arm is all wrapped up and healing, the only thing he can feel is a slight tingling, a little itchiness every now and again.

El couldn't exactly have given him a heads up seen as she barely even remembers getting hers the first time around. She'd been just a little kid, only old enough to walk and eat and dress herself.

Mike won't lie and pretend it didn't, you know, sting or whatever when the needle first touched his skin (because it fucking did), but he's also not in the mood to tell his friends that he almost shed a tear when it was finished (in relief, he defends himself).

They're the same size, and the same font; some nice scribbly thing they'd picked out after ten minutes of overthinking it.

Her left forearm is all covered up in the plastic wrap, but she's clearly already tempted to unravel it and let the cool fall air just hit her skin because she keeps eyeing her arm, and eyeing Mike, and nibbling at her bottom lip.

"Are you okay?"

She nods, and there's a delayed heaviness to her reply.

"Thank you," El's brows crease and she feels her shoulders rise and

fall, "You didn't have to, you know. I was only kidding."

Mike tries to fake surprise, but he's unable to hide the grin that spreads over his whole face, "And you tell me this now? Now that I've marked my body for you?"

She frowns, and he thinks that maybe she's taken his words to heart more than he wanted her to, "Are you mad?" She reaches for his hand, and her fingertips dance along the edge of his right wrist.

"What? No." His expression copies her own, but his lips part and he beams a toothy smile down at her, mouth suddenly dry, "Hell no."

"OK." She nods, finds some kind of peace in that, "Good."

"You want to head in?"

Mike gestures towards the diner, swaying their hands back and forth, brows raised as he waits for her reply.

"Max will never shut up about this."

"Wait until they find out we both did it."

She pries her hand from his then, tugging down the sleeve of his sweater until his whole arm is covered.

"El?" Does she not-?

"Surprise them." She offers, clasping his hand back between both of her own.

It's still early afternoon, but they agreed to meet the rest of the party back at the diner for El's birthday celebration. Now that she's eighteen and all, and Hopper will let them get away with a little bit more, and Dustin kind of maybe bribed Steve into buying them some serious booze.

"Shit!" His eyes snap closed and he throws his head back, clearly pissed off about something, "I totally forgot your present!"

"Oh."

"You go in, and I'll just head home real quick, okay? I think I left it in the basement but my mom probably moved it when she cleaned yesterday and... yeah, that's totally why I didn't think-"

El side-grins with pursed lips, leaning into his side to catch his attention. "Mike, it's fine." She wraps her hands around his free arm, pulls him closer to her, "This can be my present."

"Really?" He voices, uncertain, "It's really good, though."

"Really," she repeats, pushing the door open when they near the entrance, "I promise."

Mike smiles, leaning down to kiss the top of her head, mumbling into her curls, "Does this make me hardcore now?"

"Maybe." She shrugs, lets her eyes dance along his nose, freckles and rose tip, "You're still a nerd, though."

"Birthday girl!"

Dustin calls out to her from the back of the restaurant, arms flailing around wildly. He's got a gift bag in one hand, a big gold '18' balloon in the other.

"Wheeler, let her go so she can come and open her shit!"

Never one to disappoint his friends, Mike all but refuses to loosen his grip on the girl, sliding his right hand down her left arm until he can grasp her hand in his own.

He intertwines their fingers, watches as the bandaged skin brushes against his own, covered tattoo, hidden out of sight.

It'll always be this way; when their hands brush, their arms will cross, their wrists will touch, and their promises will forever be kept.

"Hey, did you get it?" Max is rushing over to them, hands full with a giant pack of chips, "What did you get, I wanna see..."

It's only then, with her friend all bug-eyed and nosy, that El realizes she hadn't told anyone what she had finally settled on.

Maybe she'd been just a little too wrapped up in Mike Wheeler and his promises to care what anybody else would think.

"I got Mike's face tattooed on my ass."